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The Fulbright Challenge

Senator Fulbright's second assault on American political clichés is again stimulating the American people to reassess the dogmas that have dictated foreign and domestic policy since the end of World War II. His initial plea that we dare to think some "unthinkable things" about the cold war has now been supplemented by a call for a shift in national priorities from military might to human betterment.

Mr. Fulbright's central theme at Chapel Hill was in the direct line of a philosophy voiced eloquently by some recent Presidents beginning with Franklin D. Roosevelt. A recognition that America's strength rests not merely on arms but on higher standards of individual liberty and well-being was the essence of Roosevelt's Four Freedoms; and two decades later, President Eisenhower's farewell broadcast warned of the dangers to liberty in letting "the military-industrial complex" get too powerful. The beginnings of a thaw in Soviet-American relations gave President Kennedy the basis for his own notable re-evaluation in his American University speech last June. President Johnson has emphasized the building of a better America in his State of the Union message and embellished this theme with his declaration of an "unconditional war on poverty" last month.

In this context, what Senator Fulbright did was less to point new directions than to give eloquent and urgent notice of the extent to which a changing world alignment permits us to devote much more of our resources to building schools, homes and hospitals; beautifying the country and abolishing want. The need for more critical Congressional evaluation of defense and space budgets has long been evident, and never more so than in this period when so many vested interests—military, industrial and political—are likely to block reductions that could be made with no loss in national safety.

Each day brings new evidence of the manner in which the nuclear stalemate of an era of "overkill" makes relative economic and social standards the real determinant in the competition between rival ideologies. Premier Khrushchev in his speech the other day at a Hungarian chemical plant made it plain that this ideological war is not over. He continued to label the United States as an "imperialist" and "predatory" power, but he emphasized that the test of victory between Communism and capitalism would be which system gave the people more good houses, clothes, schools, hospitals, universities—in short, "all the things that make life richer and finer."

In this phase of the cold war, we have an immeasurable edge. We still need, as Mr. Fulbright noted, billions of dollars to keep up our military defenses, but it would be a tragic misreading of history not to redress the imbalance that has caused us to starve our appropriations for human welfare and community improvement. Extending the boundaries of the good life for all our people could be the most effective step for America in the "policy of mutual example" Mr. Khrushchev has proposed as the key to disarmament and a durable peace.